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ABSTRACT

An awareness of the culture and social structure of the lower class Black American community is crucial for understanding "Black English," and therefore is vital for those engaged in educating Black Americans. An in-group means of communication and expression of group solidarity, Black English does not however represent a single code, but rather, membership in any one of a variety of subgroups, based primarily on age and sex differences. Variations in patterns of speech and life stages which differ markedly from those of "mainstream America" (and depart from the expectations of middle class white teachers) account for the great frustrations of Black children upon entering schools where the value system and cultural assumptions are alien and where their own language patterns and social structures are ignored or patently rejected. The educational system will continue to fail these children until the school recognizes and understands the differences as they actually exist, finds the appropriate means for utilizing the linguistic abilities of Black children, and recognizes the nature of Black Culture as a whole. (Numerous illustrative examples of these varying linguistic and social phenomena, and a bibliography are included.) (MF)

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AFRO-AMERICAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

The great majority of Blacks in the United States come from a different culture and utilize a different speaking system than Euro-Americans. Yet those who control our educational policy refuse to consider such a possibility and to adjust their aims accordingly. It would be pleasant to think that this was because educators continue to operate in terms of the 'loving' principle of education, that everyone is the same beneath the skin and that if we just go to these 'disadvantaged' others with love that we will be answered in kind. But this would be overlooking the fact that love seldom enters the ghetto classroom, only fear and a sense of insufficiency for the task. Furthermore, there is little doubt that there are few educators in such a milieu who don't readily admit that their students <u>are</u> different, though they would probably ascribe this to some condition of social class rather than culture. To give voice to this publicly as the educator has long since learned, is to be branded a racist, and so he commonly keeps his trap shut (the metaphor is amazingly apt in this context). In the past, attributions of cultural difference has commonly been associated with racist arguments, for in this line' of ethnocentric argument, <u>difference</u> equals <u>inferiority</u> -- or in its more recent vocabulary, 'deficiency', 'disadvantage', or 'social pathology'.

But there <u>are</u> cultural differences which are observable, and they are ones which have a direct bearing on whether the Black child gets educated or not. These differences often are small units of behavior, but they are in the very areas in which those embarrassments and frustrations arise between teacher and student which are not discerned and therefore not avoided. Their reenactment simply adds to the avalarche of indignities to which Afro-American kids are subjected.

Perhaps the most important dimension of culture is the performance dimension of the behavior system. Lower class Afro-Americans in the United States do not communicate the same way other Americans do, and that troubles us a good deal. It especially irritates those of us who have operated most of our lives on the assimilationist ideal, the melting pot set of expectations, and this must include a great majority of teachers in this country. Repeatedly, we are frustrated in our expectations, and this frustration is more often than not leveled not at our assumptions (for they remain unexamined, for the most part) but at our students. We have many problems which we share with Martin Joos' legendary schoolmarm, Miss Fidditch, not least of which is the astonishment that in the face of the obvious educational, economic, social and political advantages to be garnered by speakin Standard English (SE), this strange way of Negro talking, Black English (BE), has not only persisted but has intensified and prdiferated.

The reaction to this persistence all too often is one of attributing a kind of permanent pathological condition to those who speak in this other manner. If blacks can't learn to speak and act correctly, we seem to argue, there must be something genetically or socially wrong with them. The racists among us say, "Well what else can we expect from people like that?" The liberals, on the other hand, say "It's not their fault, for we've created the degrading social conditions and the economic deprivation which makes them incapable of capitalizing upon the advantages of our way of life." Though the latter is obviously more well-intentioned, both define lower class blacks by using the norms of white middle class behavior and therefore implicitly assume that our way of life is superior, more civilized. All of these approaches would deny, denigrate, or simply overlook the fact that the language and the culture of Afro-Americans is just as successful and just as systematic as our own, but (like all other languages and cultures) must be understood in its own terms. In fact, if we judge a culture in terms of an ability to endure in the face of threatening environmental forces, we would have to own to the superiority of Black Culture.

We all know that BE is different from SE, whatever our emotional or social reactions to these differences may be. But not until recently has there been much of an attempt to discover what the structural bases of these differences are. Most of this investigation

has come from the staff of the Center for Applied Linguistics, most notably William A. Stewart, Roger Shuy, Joan Baratz, Walter A. Wolfram, and J.L. Dillard. The work of Beryl Bailey, William Labov and, more recently, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan has also been of importance here. Most of these have been linguists. They consequently tend to define Black English by distinctive phonological and morphological features, often the same ones which the white community has used as a basis for stigmatizing blacks. Their original work was mainly descriptive or historical, the latter dealing with the creole system out of which these differences arose. Only recently has this perspective broadened, with the Detroit study attempting to see how wide-ranging these features are among black speakers of all classes. (Wolfram, 1970a). As Wolfram expressed it, "To understand the significance of speech as an indicator of social status in the black community, it is insufficient to consider only one subset [the lower class] of the community." (Wolfram, 1970b, 249).

But such a broadening is still testing the same linguistic variables, and continues to neglect the very kind of contextual data which might explain the fluctuations and drifts which they observed. Of special importance there are segmentations within lower class black communities that have not been borne in mind, groupings who give voice to their groupness through their different speaking behavior. But these intragroup speaking differences are not to be gotten at effectively through exploring just the linguistic dimension of the

data. As one of the CAL people, Ralph W. Fasold, pointed out in regard to these linguistic considerations: "Rigorous research will reveal that although there may be some features of Black English which are surprisingly and extensively different from anything in any English dialect spoken by whites, most of the differences between the speech of whites and Black English will be relatively superficial." (Fasold, 237: Labov, 1970B)

The very revealing structural and historical variations pointed out by these linguists must be supplemented by analyses of the varieties of speech which exist within the black community and therefore properly constitute what is called Black English. This means studying not only language but interactional behavior in general, the ways in which different varieties (consciously or unconsciously, overtly or covertly) are used to articulate social distinctions within the speaking community.

BE is more than just a composite of these structural traits. It is a speaking system by which members of lower class black groups not only communicate and entertain each other, but which is also used, like all speaking systems, as a means by which the group proclaims its sense of community, and/or differentiates segments within itself. There is an integral relationship between the speech system and the social structure of any community, and in the case of BE it is crucial to understand this relationship because those very communications features which have become functionally

central to the black community are generally the very traits which are stigmatized by Euro-American middle class observers. In spite of the social pressure to learn SE forms which this stigmatization engenders, BE has nevertheless maintained itself.

Just why this is so is almost certainly due to the presence of social pressures within the black community, which are stronger than those coming from outside, and which militate toward using features which are discernibly black. These pressures differ, however, from one segment of the community to another, and these differences are often expressed in the stigmatized features which are retained and dramatized by the segment. The social structure of the lower class black community is, among other things, capable of being described in terms of the varieties of BE which each segment chooses as appropriate to its image of itself.

Of course, there are certain segments such as small children or recent immigrants to the city from the country who have little to do with the choice of speech variety, and who are therefore subject to having their images managed by those who would stigmatize them for their code. But both are subject to adding varieties to their repertoires, and in all probability, divesting themselves at least of the most 'backward' signs of their speaking patterns.

But there are other segments, most notably adolescents and later streetmen groups who perform in varieties which are filled with forms of speech which are clearly and dramatically of the stigmatized sort. In these cases, however, the pattern arises because

this variety has a high affect, aggressive tone which enables these groups to proclaim their solidarity in the face of a common enemy. In the case of the adolescent, those against whom the aggressions are directed are those who would frustrate the initiative and group endeavors of the young -- the denizens of the home and its values (older women, preachers) and the white institutional world, primarily the police. In the case of streetmen, the enemy is the feminine constraining world, and significantly, female talk is demonstrably closer to SE than male talk. [illegible] noticed greater competence of black women with SE, and the accompanying greater ability in communications situations with the Euro-American world. A variety of BE close to SE thus has come to be identified with the feminine world by both men and women; conversely, the blackest elements of BE are associated with men. Language becomes one further feature of contention in the opposition between streetmen and housewomen. (Abrahams, 1964; 1970a; 1970c). It is these two oppositions within the black community itself, in combination with the fact that the 'kidtalk' variety of BE which the child learns from his slightly older peers in early childhood is also the most archaic, that accounts for the most part the retention of the great majority of the features stigmatized in the BE speaking behavior system. (For a fuller analysis of these forces, see Abrahams, 1970c). Add to this the tendency to maximize

speech differences by a group whenever they are threatened by outsiders, with the constant threat under which lower class blacks exist, and it should no longer seem strange that Black English has maintained itself as the primary in-group means of communication.

Many have neglected to take such contextual speaking features and their accompanying rules of appropriateness (or license) into account in discussing the persistence of black speech in the United States. To some extent, this situation exists because we don't know what Black English is, because most haven't been willing to admit to its existence as a language. But even those who have not only accepted the existence of a distinct BE but have actually described the historical and cultural bases of Black English have been, at least to some degree, taken up with the idea that BE and SE are alternative systems, and that if we could only substitute BE for SE in the early curriculum that many of our educational problems for blacks might be solved. In certain regards such a move would be beneficial indeed, if tied to a larger understanding of the patterns of black culture. But we cannot cling to the notion that to describe BE as a single variety as it would be spoken by an ideal speaker-listener would solve the black language "problem". To do so does not take into consideration exactly those social and cultural features which provide for the maintenance of BE in the face of the pressures for linguistic acculturation. BE is not a single code, just as SE is not. Further there are certain facets of SE that are an important part of one BE

variety: woman talk! Both are comprised of a series of varieties, each of which is appropriate to only certain situations.

Further, each has varieties which, if used in inappropriate circumstances would result in rejection. Most important for our present concerns, the differences between the varieties as they are observed and manipulated by a speaker are used as culture markers, places at which a culture conflict of some sort has arisen.

The voicing of different varieties in a dramatic way signals either confrontation between two potentially antagonistic segments of the community, or it underlines group solidarity in the face of a common enemy. Therefore to understand how Black English is used, and why it persists, we must first comprehend the configuration of these segments and how the speaking of some variety of BE (stigmatized otherwise) marks the membership and the boundaries of these subgroups.

Our knowledge of BE arises from a consideration of the features of greatest contrast between BE and SE. Our understanding arises from more than just the researches of schooled linguists. We know it from those numerous jokes about language misuse, and from numerous other verbal devices perpetuating the Negro stereotype. Stereotyping, however, is not a process which always deals in falsehoods. In the realm of language, in fact, the stereotype

often arises from a real recognition that a language difference exists, and the stereotyper often takes fairly accurate note of what these differences are. The problem with stereotyping is that these differences are interpreted as evidences of linguistic disabilities, and thereby triggers the total repertoire of stereotypic traits leading to imputations of inferiority or deviance or worse.

Until recently, there were few who would be willing to accept the argument that there is a system involved in Negro language use; the assumption (shared by blacks on a folk level, incidentally) was that Negro language was bad, broken, the result of misunderstanding and lack of control. Even now, there are those who accept BE as a systematic set of varieties, but who have such a restrictive analytic frame of reference that it is difficult for them to recognize that the contrasts which make them most dramatically aware of the different systems (i.e., when a single speaker switches varieties from a form closer to SE to one more creole-like, or vice versa) are also subject to a cultural system, one which is as successfully describable as the language itself.

For instance, in a recent article by Roger Shuy, a code-contrast is noted, but Shuy is at a loss to explain the phenomenon. Reporting on an interview with a middle class Afro-American child, Shuy observed that the informant responded to all of the questions in an appropriate conversational form of SE. But in the spirited interchange which followed one question, "Did you ever have a

teacher that hollered a lot?" four grammatical constructions arose which were noticeably closer to the creole-like forms of BE, and would therefore have been regarded as stigmatizing by the middle class observer. Shuy's explanation of this is that "We can only conclude that the question...triggered some sort of emotional, therefore relatively uninhibited response". This begs the big question, of course: why should this middle class child, when he becomes uninhibited, resort to otherwise stigmatizing code forms? To be sure, the author goes on to notice that similar departures were observed in regard to death, accidents, illness, fighting, and religion. But what does a hollering teacher have to do with these other occurrences? (Shuy, 8-9)

The answer lies outside the usual sociolinguistic frame of reference, and this is perhaps why Shuy neglects to pursue the subject; however, it seems crucial to ask such questions if we are to understand both why creole codes of BE have, in modified form, persisted, and what uses they have even within the usually SE-speaking middle class. Clearly the other subjects, death, fighting, and so on, are recurrent anxiety-producing situations, and one would suppose that high tension is brought about also by the hollering teacher. But there were certainly other such school situations which to us would be equally productive of anxiety in which the middle class informant maintained his linguistic cool. We can only speculate that the answer to the quandary lies in the meaning of

hollering as carried out by an authority figure, the teacher. It is almost an educational truism among sensitive teachers in the areas of East Texas in which I have worked that if you want your black students to listen and to obey, you never yell at them; they don't understand behavior of that sort, and they don't react to it as white students will. It is, at least to those students, a sign of open hostility when coming from an authority figure, and not an order-producing mechanism. Therefore hollering brings about the emotional retreat so often pointed out by middle class teachers as hostility, lack of attention, or disrespect. There is a correlation here between this piece of data reported by Shuy and the fact that hollering is something which is done within the lower class black situation when two people are extremely angry at each other.

We do have data which would begin to corroborate this hypothesis, at any rate. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan recently observed that under certain anxiety situations in which there is some sense of interpersonal or intercultural "rub", lower class black speakers will monitor their speaking away from SE and toward BE when they wish to emphasize some kind of solidarity, or group value: "This kind of shifting is non-casual [i.e., self-conscious and stylized] and its impact is to underscore Black as separate." (Mitchell-Kernan, 75) Whether this motive is shared by Shuy's middle class informant is unclear. He may have been indicating a retreat not into the black group but into one made up of only his black peers.

Monitoring of this sort has been observed in virtually all segments of black society. But it is not just the process itself but its social meaning which need noting - what situations bring about this shifting, how the shifting is cued, what direction the shift takes (toward SE or creole) and how this operation is understood by the speaking community. Mitchell-Kernan, for instance, reports among her California informants, that the switching occurs either to articulate a group separation and a reaffirmation of community of interest or value, or to "mark" (mock) someone. Riesman reports similar monitoring from Antigua in the West Indies, which he interprets as a response to the presence of an SE speaker, behavior which I have observed throughout the West Indies. (Riesman; Abrahams and Bauman).

To understand this kind of speaking phenomenon it is necessary to take note of a good deal more than just the linguistic features which cue this kind of shift. The social context of the shift must be taken into consideration, and this may mean that information must be provided on social typology and role repertoire, on group stratification and segmentation, and in the case of multicultural situations, the effects of the use of different varieties not just on the members of the speaking community, but on those outside of it. Gerald Suttles, in his recent study of a multiethnic neighborhood in Chicago, points out how this kind of data may be important by referring to the use of one dramatic variety of Black

English, "jive-talk", from the perspective of the ingroup and of total outsiders:

> For the most part, syntactic and phonological differences divide the white and Negro residents in the area. An interesting departure is the use of "jive". This special vocabulary...is restricted according to both age and ethnicity, but its usage overlaps the Negro-white distinction. Negro boys are most expert at this sort of discourse, but the English-speaking Mexican and Puerto Rican boys are also somewhat conversant....The Italians seldom use any of this vocabulary even to the point of understanding it. In the case of "jive", however, the Italians do not regard language differences so much as an attempt to talk behind someone's back, "show off" one's knowledge of urban ways, or display one's emancipation from the homely virtues of family, ethnic group, and neighbors. To the Italians, the use of "jive" often indicates a person who has scuttled the surest signs of human feeling and concern for the bonds that secure personal relations within the neighborhood. To the Negroes, and less so among the Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, a familiarity with this youthful jargon is only a sign of a willingness to expand the magic circle of trust beyond that of family, ethnic group, and territorial compatriots. (Suttles, 65)

Suttles indicates an awareness of the larger frameword of language behavior here, and notes accurately that the problem is often not a matter of conflicting ideal values, but lies rather in what he calls notational devices, self-conscious units of behavior "that each group relies upon to express and encode their adherence to [their] basic social rules." (Suttles, 62) Misunderstanding between members of different ethnic communities as often as not arise because of a misunderstanding of externals rather than from a disparity between the values which lie behind the behaviors. But these externals and the resultant failures in understanding are just as real and important to an understanding of the intergroup behavior within such a community.

> Quite possibly, there is...a correspondence between the meanings attached to the gesture of Italians and Negroes. Yet, so long as each group does not know how to translate this correspondence they go on misunderstanding each other, and incorrectly interpreting each other's behavior... Language differences between each ethnic group are often exacerbated by nonverbal acts which accompany or supplant speech...Negro boys...have a "cool" way of walking ("pimp's walk") in which the upper trunk and pelvis rock fore and aft while the head remains stable with the eyes looking straight ahead. The "pimp's walk" is quite slow, and the Negroes take it as a way of "strutting" or "showing off." The whites usually interpret it as a pointed lack of concern for those adjacent to the walker. (Suttles, 62, 66)

Almost certainly in a multi-ethnic situation such as the one Suttles describes, the blacks who walk in this manner are made to know how the others regard this style of propulsion. One can predict with a reasonable degree of certainty, however, that if this affects their behavior at all it will be toward stylizing the walk even more so, for it is characteristic of this type of young black performer to seize upon any presentational device which produces a high affect and response and to capitalize upon it, even when the affect may be negative, as in this case.

It is crucial then, in developing an educational system for lower class blacks, to understand that these alternative behaviors exist and may be subject to misunderstanding. But we would be falling into the stereotyping trap, on the other hand, if we expected this kind of behavior from every black student. There are important variables within the social system of Afro-Americans which any teacher will have taken note of (though most will have found it difficult to capitalize upon in the classroom) because of an inability to see the

system of behavior and the functions which lie behind these communicative performances.

The most important variables to note in black socialization are the same as those in other groups: age and sex. But the developmental sequence in which these variables figure is quite different from those of the Euro-American middle class. At the risk of being overschematic, the following diagram of lower class black socialization gives a glimpse of how different these variables operate:

> Stage One: 'Lap Baby' -- Infancy; child given a great deal of attention by mother (or mother-surrogate); seldom out of someone's arms except while asleep. First motor activities and first language learning carried on in adult-infant interactions.
>
> Stage Two: 'Knee Baby' -- When child learns to walk, he or she is gradually placed in the charge of an older child. This means that peer-grouping extends to the toddler stage. The older child takes over most interactional and educational roles; communication becomes very restricted between adults and children at this point. Peer language, a very creole-like form becomes the variety by which language is learned and communications carried out. Concepts of work, responsibility, household cooperation learned from older children. Girls tend to be entrusted with more responsibilities than boys, though both learn a wide range of procedures (running errands, tending other children, washing, ironing, food preparation).
>
> Stage Three: Older childhood; entrusted with great responsibility within the home, especially if one is the oldest child. Teaches others how to live on the streets, how to socialize successfully, how to cooperate, etc. (This is the time when absence from school often occurs because of need to care for younger children.)
>
> Stage Four: Early adolescence -- around age nine or ten for boys, later for girls, there begins to be an expectation that the child is no longer capable of acting responsibly. They enter the free time of life, with its attendant very strong peer-group orientation. Playful competition aimed at group entertainment becomes the primary mode of interaction, especially with the boys, but the play is extremely formulaic

repetitive, imitative of the older adolescents and the young adult swingers. Sexual contacts begin; girls are just as aggressive as boys in these encounters.

Stage Five: Later adolescence and young adulthood-- here being 'hip' takes over; style is emphasized for the purpose of managing one's image, reputation. High value placed on performance invention, improvisation, as a means of establishing one's style, but not just in talk and music but in clothing, walk, athletics, etc. Hip talk and jive walk become the marks of peer-group exclusiveness, exclusion being aimed at all of the 'square' world, the young, the old, the white, etc. Sexual contacts produce children, but do not lead to establishment of household.

Stage Six: Adulthood-- a limited range of alternative life-styles now come into play, and the individual is generally called upon to make a choice between setting up household or continuing the peer-group oriented street life. Women, with the birth of a number of children, gravitate toward establishing households earlier than men. Two types of such households occur, those which approximate the middle class model, with a resident male (generally father to most or all the children and husband to the female household head) and those with no continuing man present. This is the period, then, in which there develops a very strong male-female split, with household values associated with women.

These are the stages of life which have greatest effect upon the socialization of the black student and which therefore may affect his school behavior. Some of these features, such as the cooperative, peer-oriented early childhood pattern, are probably common to all lower class groups in the United States, but other characteristics are uniquely Afro-American. But what is of greatest importance is that the pattern departs in so many ways from that of mainstream America, and these departures are those which, because they are not taken into consideration, produce in great part failure to educate the majority of blacks. These failures arise because the teacher, who is by definition middle class, assumes that all children are going to adapt to school culture in the

same middle class way. The frustration of the students who bring a different kind of home experience, value system, and pattern of communication is apparent to anyone who cares to look, in the response of black children to school, and in the very large drop-out rate which occurs at those ages at which the developmental systems of the black student departs most from the expectations of middle class people.

There are so many ways in which these frustrations build, but there are two repeated failures of understanding that are so profound and long-lasting in their implications that they may be pointed out here as illustrations. It has almost become a cliche in educationist circles that it is not fair to greet the child from this background with the message (delivered in so many subtle ways) that he comes from an unfortunate background and that he speaks badly because of it. But this is not the greatest indignity visited upon these children, it seems to me. Much more egregious is the failure to understand that there is a perceptible life-pattern shared by these children, and it is one which has already bestowed on most of them by the time they reach school a high level of responsibility. The teacher, going on her middle class assumptions, treats the black child as she would the white, as if the pre-school period was one of idyllic freedom in which only a minimal amount of responsibility was taught. Imagine the frustration on encountering this approach of one who has been caring for younger children for years. This frustration, furthermore, is compounded, for just at the time when black culture says that the children are free of these household tasks, the school is telling them that they are finally being

expected to shoulder social responsibilities. Add to this the cooperation-in-learning-and-working which lies behind this socialization system, and the definition of such learning cooperation as cheating within the classroom, and it becomes a little bit easier to understand why black students get turned off on education at such an early age.

These failures of understanding are important for every teacher of lower class blacks to recognize. But the language arts teacher has special problems because of the differences in the social developmental pattern between middle class pupils and lower class black students. Nothing stigmatizes the black child more than his speaking behavior, and the teacher rightly sees that she is failing in her job if she doesn;t get the student to recognize the functional differences between his way of speaking and that of mainstream America. But her job is considerably complicated if she doesn't recognize what peer-group pressures have brought about the leanning of 'kid talk', the variety which most bring to the earliest grades, and how this variety of black talk differs from say that of the women, the adolescent, and so on. What is important about recognizing the black developmental pattern is that each age or sex-based group defines itself in one important dimension by the variety of language which it speaks. Black English is not just the pre-school (or 'country') variety with its many vestiges of creole (Pan-Afro-American, historically previous) forms; nor is it just the dramatically

different forms of hip talk. It is the entire range of varieties spoken by lower class blacks.

Perhaps of greatest importance to implementing a black education is the recognition that, though Afro-American children may come to school with a very limited and creole-like code, there are forces outside of school which will teach the lesson of alternative and more prestigious codes on them. This does not mean that we must reject the notion of using 'kid talk' as the code by which language arts are first taught to the, for that is the only variety which they can deal with effectively. But it does mean that the limitations on this speaking system in the area of child-adult communications (existing more on the level of manners than of speaking competence) must be thoroughly understood by anyone who hopes to deal effectively with black children in the early grades.

Another implication of this approach is that verbal abilities will grow quickly in the first few years of school, because of the increasing peer-group pressures. But this also means that kid talk will contain a number of stigmatizing features which must not be used in the classroom except for purposes of demonstrating language variability and change.

Perhaps the most important implication, however, is that somehow we must find appropriate means for harnessing the tremendous amount of creative energy which goes into the development of verbal dexterity among adolescents who attain status through their

performance abilities. We must undertake research to isolate what the intra-group performance patterns are and how they differ from those of Standard English Euro-American norms. Then we must find ways to utilize them in our language arts curricula. Not to do this will be to run away from a teaching resource of immense potential, a retreat which we have indulged in far too long. But in developing our language curricula, we must not just focus on the continuing creole elements of BE. We must emphasize the tremendous adaptability which black attitudes toward effective speaking emphasize. Languages are parts of speaking systems of behavior and are made up of a range of varieties, and Black English is unique only in its configuration of codes and the uses to which they are put in lower class black society. In other words, we cannot understand Black English until we recognize the nature of Black Culture as a whole.

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